“Performing Pastoralism: Music, Dance, and (Im)mobility in a Kenyan Refugee Camp”

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**Bio**: Oliver Y. Shao is a PhD. candidate in Ethnomusicology in the Folklore and Ethnomusicology Department at Indiana University Bloomington. His doctoral research examines refugees living in Kenya as political and cultural subjects that use their expressive cultural practices to constitute qualities of citizenship amidst physical and social upheaval, and state and humanitarian-induced structural inequality. With financial contributions from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and IU’s Office of the Vice President of International Affairs, his study is based on over eleven months of field research conducted at the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya between 2013 and 2015. His research is further informed by six months of volunteer work in 2011 for the International Rescue Committee in the Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya.

**Abstract** Ethnomusicologists have long privileged mobility over immobility as a lens through which to understand and analyze music. In recent years, some ethnomusicologists have argued for greater scholarly attention towards thinking about music in relation to immobility (see Steingo 2015). This talk builds on these sets of literatures through exploring the ways people with nomadic backgrounds living in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya negotiate state-sanctioned immobility. Drawing on over eleven months of ethnographic research carried out over two trips to Kakuma between 2013 and 2015, I argue that Dinka communities constitute meaningful qualities of citizenship through their pastoralist music and dance traditions. I further suggest that their engagement in these practices is far from a simple matter, due in part to curfews, restrictions on movement, and cultural prohibitions. As such, their engagements require what I call “acoustic maneuverability,” a concept I employ to articulate the unique attributes of music and dance that
facilitate their constrained deployment as well as the tactics, adroitness, and creativity required of their cultural participants within a highly regulated environment. This talk offers keen insights for those interested in better understanding the ways in which forced migrants facing dispossession and social upheaval in a refugee complex reconstitute normalcy, continuity, and belonging through the active, though constrained engagement in a meaningful social practice.